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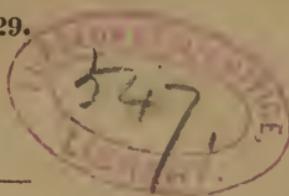
AT

THE MEDICAL COMMENCEMENT

OF THE

Columbian College, D. C.

MARCH 11, 1829.



BY JAMES M. STAUGHTON, M. D.

PROFESSOR OF SURGERY,

DEAN OF THE MEDICAL DEPARTMENT.

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CHARGE.

GENTLEMEN,

In the name of the Professors of the Medical Department, permit me to offer you our hearty congratulations on the honours you have this day received, and to welcome you into the ranks of our profession with the most affectionate friendship.

You have reached the goal on which your eye has been so steadily fixed during the period of your studies; and, from the elevation on which you now stand, a broader and a brighter prospect is spread before you. You rejoice in the anticipations of the future, and your teachers are prepared to offer the fervent prayer, that that future may bring you reputation, happiness, and prosperity. It is natural that you should feel lively joy at the outset of your career. Your morning is bright and cloudless. The science you have selected, and of which you have been judged so worthy, is justly ranked among the most elevated in its nature—the most beneficial in its tendency. The practitioner of medicine, with which character you have just been clothed, is one whose ministry commands the respect of men—the admiration of sages. The mightiest rulers of the earth confide their lives to his care, and blindly follow his ordinances. By the continued exercise of his benevolent functions he becomes the benefactor of the community, and by the empire he exercises over Death, he is (with reverence be it spoken,) in some measure, the representative of Divinity upon the earth.

The diseases of the mind, in all their dark and almost inscrutable forms—furious mania, hypochondria that monster of a thousand shapes, moping melancholy, drivelling idiocy, and the varying effects of the passions in their thousand attitudes and colours—are brought under his subjection; and the empire of the mind, as well as that of the body, yields obedience to his potent remedies.

If the magnitude of its aims, if the success of its endeavours, if the benevolence of its motives, if the learning, the talents and the virtue of its members, contribute any thing towards the respectability of a profession, then, Gentlemen, have you just reason for that pride, and for that exultation, which you at this moment feel at the association which has just been accomplished.

But to these honours are joined responsibilities of the most awful character. You are about to enter into contract with men for their lives! If you err, through ignorance or neglect, their blood will be required at your hand!

I call upon you on this solemn occasion, in the presence of your assembled fellow-citizens, to sacrifice, on the altar of Medical Science, every selfish motive! You are no longer to live for yourselves. You have this day devoted yourselves to the cause of suffering humanity. You are henceforward to allow yourselves no pleasures, no engagements, that will interfere with your professional duties. You will have to support the obloquy, the caprice, the ingratitude of men—to expose your lives when the wide wasting pestilence desolates the land—at all times, and in all places, to manifest an unwavering courage, an inexhaustible patience: in one

word, to live a life of continued self-denial and privation. Have you calculated on these duties? Are you prepared for these sacrifices?

We present you to the public, not as ordinary graduates in medicine, of whose qualifications we know little more than that which the result of a casual examination may have exhibited. The smallness of our numbers has brought us into daily contact, and afforded us an accurate knowledge of the success with which you have followed your course of studies, and of the zeal with which you have improved your practical advantages. *Your* success is thus rendered the more honourable, and *our* persuasion of your future respectability and usefulness the more confident.

You at this moment resemble the mariner who is about to leave a quiet and a peaceful shore. You are prepared for the voyage—all is ready for your departure—you are putting off into the stream—you will soon spread your snowy canvass to the wind. Heaven grant that, with prosperous gales to propel you forward, and with the hand of Providence to steer your bark, you may safely traverse the stormy sea of professional life.

You go, Gentlemen! but remember, I beseech you, that you leave behind, friends who are anxious for your happiness, and jealous for your reputation. And when the rough surges of the ocean are roaring around you, and when the storm of adversity is beating on your head, you will know where to find warm hearts to sympathise and console, and active hands to relieve you.

At the outset of your career you will be placed in situations of peculiar delicacy, and under circumstances of the most distressing difficulty. The eyes of your fellow-citizens in general, and of your fellow practi-

tioners in particular, are placed on you from the beginning. Your moral and your professional conduct will be scrutinized with the greatest closeness. Circumspection, uprightness, and unremitting attention to your business, will ensure you success: they cannot fail.

The young practitioner, conscious of his knowledge, becomes impatient, and but too often disconsolate, at seeing the ignorant pretender advanced by rapid strides to reputation and fortune, while he languishes in obscurity and penury. Should such feelings ever cross your minds, remember that surreptitious reputation is as easily lost as it is acquired; and that though boasting noise and intriguing arts may delude the people for a while, gold will not always be confounded with dross; and that eventually your talents will be discovered, and your reputation established on a basis firm and immutable. The Roman poet tells us, that the world exhibits not a spectacle of equal grandeur with that of a virtuous man struggling with adversity. I have often thought, as I have contemplated the young practitioner of medicine toiling almost against hope, dispirited and downcast, faint yet pursuing, neglected and unknown, that such a sight might well demand our warmest admiration.

I would that time allowed me to enter more at large into these scenes, and to offer you such advice as the experience of the most distinguished of our profession has sanctioned; but the interesting duties in which we have this morning been engaged* have occupied so

* The Inauguration of the Rev. S. CHAPIN, D. D. as President of the College, preceded the conferring of the Degrees on the Medical Graduates.

large a portion of our time, that I shall use the utmost brevity in the few further remarks I have to offer.

Hippocrates, a name dear to the profession, with that peculiar terseness that characterizes his writings, gives in a few words his idea of the character which a physician ought to sustain: “In a physician,” says he, “there should be a contempt for money, a sense of shame, plainness and cleanliness in dress, judgment, gentleness, urbanity, promptness of speech, freedom from superstition, and great integrity.” Make this aphorism your study—shape your course by its maxims.

A wise and beneficent Creator has implanted in our bosoms a desire of excellence—a thirst after reputation. When this ardour for distinction in the medical profession is really a sentiment of the soul, when it is inspired by the love of glory, it is laudable in its possessor, and uniformly increases his usefulness to his fellow men; but when it is nothing more than a thirst for gold, it soon renders him unjust—it debases and degrades him, by the various manœuvres it suggests. Interest is the cause of the most disgusting meanness; and though frequently the foundation of unjust reputation, it eventually dishonours its possessor.

In your relations to your fellow-practitioners, I must counsel you, strenuously, to maintain a spirit of good will and friendship. Our profession has been too much torn and distracted by contention among its members. The seeds of discord have been sown among us with an unsparing hand. Cultivate, as far as in you lies, the better feelings of the soul. Imitate the example of the artist, who never speaks of the production of a contemporary but in terms of praise. There is something noble and generous in such a course of conduct that

will call forth the admiration of your friends, and will ensure the approbation of that silent monitor, whose decisions are to each of us so important.

Towards the aged members of the profession shew more than even Lacedemonian reverence. Those who have been engaged in the work of benevolence before we came into existence, whose lives have been one continued act of mercy in this lower world ; those who have remembered the widow and the fatherless ; those on whom the blessing of them that were ready to perish is resting ; shall not they receive from us those honours which their virtuous lives and hoary heads demand ?

So vast are the objects of research in the circle of Medical Science, that it has been found convenient to divide them into many branches ; and though individuals have devoted their whole lives to the investigation of a single branch, they have had but too often to lament the limited nature of their researches, compared with the boundless extent of the subject. With such objects before you, Gentlemen, need I urge on you the necessity of a life of close and unremitting study ? Without a settled and steady plan, without a sacred devotion of some part of your time to mental improvement, you will soon sink into mere routinists, and will lose that ardent thirst for investigation and research by which you are now distinguished, and which designates the character of every enlightened physician.

Medical Science, Gentlemen, is progressive. Improvements are daily coming to light, and unless you keep pace with the general advance, in a few years you will be left behind. This remark will apply more particularly to those of you who are destined to exercise your profession in the country, where intercourse

with other practitioners is rarely to be enjoyed. Keep up, Gentlemen, with the profession. I would say more—strive to stand at the head of it—toil to be one of the leaders in the glorious march.

At the present moment, it is strongly impressed on the minds of most medical men that new light is about to break forth on our science. The singular development of the anatomical structure of the brain, which has been the result of recent investigation, and the wonderful similarity, I had almost said identity, that has been proved to exist between the nervous and galvanic fluids, seem to authorize the anticipation.

Never shall I forget seeing the tear drop from the eye of the venerated Wistar, as he exhibited to his class the convolutions of the brain, and confessed his inability to unfold them. With what joy would he have received the light that has since then been shed abroad! with what rapture would he have unfolded the convoluted mass in the crowded amphitheatre!

A glorious morning is approaching! Which of us shall be its harbinger? Is not this a noble theme for your ambition?—what stronger incentive to your studies can I offer you!

When a boy, Themistocles wandered about the streets by night. When asked why he did so, he answered, “The trophies of Miltiades disturb my slumbers.” Will you ignobly yield to the sleep of apathy and indolence when trophies and laurels are to be won!—when your exertions in the cause of humanity may be so nobly rewarded!

A debasing and degrading idea is entertained by some portions of the community, and even by some members of the profession itself, against which I feel

it a solemn duty to warn you. Regarding medicine as a trade, *he* is supposed to know most of his profession who knows least of other things. This idea is founded on a very limited view of the extent of Medical Science. Every branch of knowledge is rendered tributary to the exercise of his profession by the enlightened practitioner, and I would reject with the utmost disdain any attempt to put limits to a physician's acquirements.

To your care is committed the charge of Science in general. The history of the successive ages of mankind exhibits the fact, that by the medical profession have the sciences uniformly been fostered; under its care have they been cultivated and disseminated, and by the common consent of society it is considered their natural protector.

To the poor, be kind, attentive, and compassionate. They are your best patients. A faithful attendance on them will be amply rewarded in this life, and in that which is to come.

You will be entrusted by your patients with what they hold most dear, the honour and reputation of their families. You will be continually called to witness scenes of domestic distress—of family difficulties; and while your ministry will often be effectual in composing differences, and in pouring the oil of consolation on the wounded spirit, never let what transpires pass beyond the sanctuary of your own bosom. Prudence, discretion, and secrecy, are virtues of the highest order. In his celebrated oath, Hippocrates required his pupils to swear that they would never reveal any domestic scene they might witness in the course of their practice.

If you are thus to be trusted, if the veil of private life is thus to be elevated at your approach, have not

your fellow-citizens a right to demand of you the most rigid morality, uprightness of heart, and unsullied character?

You have this day been decorated with the uniform of the profession; strive, I beseech you, as you value its respectability, to keep your garments pure and unspotted.

Nor would I press less earnestly upon you a reverent and habitual respect for the dictates of our holy religion. A system that inculcates peace on earth and good will towards men, is peculiarly suited to the feelings and wants of the medical practitioner. Let your lives and habits put to blush the effrontery of wicked men, who would lay the charge of infidelity at the door of our profession.

The moment of separation has arrived. That intercourse, which has so long and so happily subsisted between us, is at an end. From this period, our paths lead in different directions. May your course be happy and prosperous! may your noble exertions in the cause of humanity be crowned with the most glorious success!

Go then, Gentlemen! bear with you the most ardent wishes of your teachers; and though, in all probability, we shall never again be assembled together on earth, may we meet in that world where sorrow, sickness, and pain are never known.



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